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TESTIMONY OF JEANNE MILSTEIN, CHILD ADVOCATE, SELECT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN

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Good Morning Senator Musto, Representative Urban and Members of the Select Committee on Children. My name is Jeanne Milstein and I am the Child Advocate for the State of Connecticut. I appreciate the opportunity to testify regarding **S.B. No. 879, An Act Concerning Oversight and Reorganization of the Department of Children and Families.**

The bill includes three charges to a task force. The first charge would be to evaluation the department's current policies, practices and procedures including whether DCF may suspend visitation prior to a court hearing. Connecticut General Statutes § 17a-10a currently requires that DCF ensure that any child in the care and custody of the department under an order of temporary custody or an order of commitment is "provided visitation with such child's parents and siblings, unless otherwise ordered by the court." In my view, this language already requires that DCF seek a court order prior to suspending visitation and is the appropriate policy. If the committee's goal is to ensure that visits are not suspended without a court hearing, I would suggest consideration of modification of section 17a-10a to clarify that such a hearing is required, rather than charging a task force to review the issue.

The second charge of the task force would be to consider changes in the structure of DCF. As I testified at the investigative hearings regarding DCF in October and November, I believe the next best step would be to undertake a leadership audit of the department. Rather than creating a task force, as outlined in this bill, I would urge you to move forward HB 6420.

The third charge of the task force is to assess whether the department should consider the use of animal-assisted therapies in child abuse and neglect prevention and intervention activities, develop a series of questions to be used in existing screening, intake, investigation, and risk and safety procedures, and engage in cross reporting of elder abuse, neglect and animal abuse. I support this concept. Often animal abuse is part of a continuum of abuse within families. Studies of child abuse within homes have shown a strong correlation with the abuse of animals in the home as well. Often, animal abuse represents a way to coerce, intimidate, and further control children and force them into

silence and fear. By improving screening methods for animal abuse during DCF investigations, my hope is that incidences of child abuse can be detected and interventions can be implemented to protect our children. Further, studies suggest that in some circumstances pets may be valuable tools for helping traumatized children to rebuild trusting relationships and develop positive self-esteem.

I urge the committee to move forward SB 897 with the suggested modifications.
Thank you for the opportunity to testify.